

## To Be a Hero

I had a once in a lifetime experience last week. I “met” a hero. A person who cared enough to risk his life. A person who took action to make a difference.

I met Sergeant William “Bill” Shemin. I didn’t actually meet him in the usual sense, as this was the unveiling of his footstone. *At Baron Hirsch Cemetery on Staten Island.*

Let me tell you his story.

It is World War I. Bill Shemin is in France. He is under machine gun fire from the Germans, in a trench. He looks up.

Men are wounded, all around him. He looks out. He sees his good buddy, Jim Pritchard, lying on the ground. Bill runs out.

Jim is lying there. He knows he is going to die. He opens his eyes and sees Bill next to him. He appreciates that Bill crept out to comfort him, to say good bye. The next thing Jim knows, he is being dragged back to the trenches by Bill, sure now, that they are both going to die.

Bill gets Jim to safety. And then Bill goes back out, two more times, and rescues two other soldiers.

Most of the higher ups in the regiment are shot and killed. Bill takes over command and saves the regiment until he is shot and wounded on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day.

Bill survived and had a family. Bill’s daughter, Elsie, who is now 88, grew up knowing that her father had fought in WW I. She might have known he had a Purple Cross. But the only way she learned this story was when Bill’s friend Jim would come to the house and say things like,

“I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for your father.”

“Your father is a real hero.”

“He should have received the Congressional Medal of Honor, but he didn’t because he is Jewish.”

Bill and Jim, both lived in New Jersey and remain close friends for many years after the war, despite the fact that Bill is a Jewish and Jim is Christian.

Bill Shemin is recognized by the US government for his heroism, but not to the degree that others who had done much less, are.

**He never receives the country’s highest honor, the Congressional Medal of Honor.** An award that was first given during the Civil War. One has only been awarded 3500 times in all of US history.

He is not the only soldier to have been overlooked due to racial or religious prejudice. So in the late ‘90s a bill was passed to revisit the applications for soldiers going back to World War II who had been passed over Medal of Honor due to discrimination. After

that, 7 African Americans, 3 Jewish Americans and 22 Asian Americans are awarded the Medal of Honor.

Elsie Shemin-Roth, Bill's daughter, is a friend of our family in St. Louis. She was frustrated that the US government only went back as far as WWII. She began a campaign to have the records opened from WW I as according to Jim Pritchard, her dad, who died in 1973, deserves to have the Honor.

The records, show the same thing. There are maps and photographs of the area. And even letters of praise from his commanding officers. But somewhere in the chain of command there is anti-Semitism. And because of this, Bill Shemin is passed over for the medal.

Elsie is a fighter and a hero in her own right. She is persistent, for 13 years she kept this fight alive. And having met Elsie this is no surprise.

On June 2, 2015, President Barack Obama presented Medals of Honor to William Shemin, Elsie's father, and Henry Johnson. A Jew and a Black, who had been passed over in WW I due to the racial and religious prejudice of the times.

In all 17 Jewish Americans have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. 3 from WWII, and Elsie efforts lead to 4 WWI veterans receiving this medal.

Elsie accepted the award for her father and the story was covered in the NY Times. The next day James Pritchard, Jr., read the story in the Times. James is the son of Jim, the man whose life had been saved. He gets very excited and immediately calls his grand-daughter, Vicky, who is a journalism major in college and gives her an assignment. – "Find the Shemins and tell them you are great-granddaughter of Jim Pritchard, one of the men whom Bill saved."

The families had lost touch in the 60's – you couldn't just Google someone! Now, The families reunited.

I had the privilege of meeting James, the son, and Elsie, Bill's daughter and other family members 2 weeks ago. It was truly an honor to be present.

I sat at lunch with Jim Pritchard's son, James, the one who read the story, his wife Lorraine, and their 3 adult children, Jim, - if that doesn't make it more confusing, and his 2 sisters, who were all about my age. They were acutely aware that none of them would exist today if Bill Shemin hadn't saved Jim Pritchard in 1918. Bill is their hero.

Bill Shemin – fought for democracy and risked his life to save others. He created a better world for his family, for the Pritchards and for us. He is a hero.

Elsie Shemin-Roth – fought to right an injustice. She believed that the government can't discriminate due to race or religion. She too is a hero.

But I told you that 2 men received the Medal of Honor last year on June 2. Let me tell you about the 2<sup>nd</sup> man.

He is Private Henry Johnson.<sup>i</sup>

Henry enlists in the army. The US military sends his unit, the all black Harlem Hellfighters, to fight with the French Army, which was meant as slight. On May 15, 1918 Henry, is manning a listen post when the Germans come across the lines. With only a knife, he repels a surprise attack by a dozen German raiders. He, single handedly holds off the enemy, preventing the capture of a wounded fellow soldier. Henry kills 4 enemy soldiers. He, himself, is wounded 21 times during the war. The French award him the quoi de Guerre for his bravery. The US Government does nothing. Because he is Black, not only is he not recognized as a hero, he is also denied Veteran's benefits given to wounded soldiers and succumbs to war related injuries in 1929.

This unfair treatment is not a surprise for at the end WWI, the US government sends a memo to the French, essentially enacting Jim Crow, "Don't let them feel too comfortable in France. Don't give them the notion that they are equals. We don't want them taking that notion with them when they come back to the US." Unbelievable.

Another remarkable element to this whole story, is that the Shemin family, had never heard of Johnson before the ceremony at the White House. When they learned that he had no family, they decided to adopt his story. They vowed to tell it whenever they remembered their father, Bill. So at the unveiling of Bill's stone, I learned about Henry Johnson and his heroism during World War I.

In the spring a tree will be planted in memory of Private Johnson, next to Bill Shemin's grave.

**Bill Shemin is a hero, Henry Johnson is a hero, Elsie Shemin Roth is a hero. They care enough to stand up against a system, to fight for what they believe in and to make a difference. To create a country worth living in even if they didn't get to fully benefit from their work.**

Like most heroes, Bill didn't feel like a hero. He was just getting the job done. Henry, most likely would have said the same thing. And Elsie was just trying to right a wrong. Most moral exemplars say the same thing. I am not a hero, there wasn't a choice in the matter.

Sometimes heroism does take great courage, other times it is just finding the simple courage to live a life doing what you know is right.

This story also reminds us that Anti-Semitism is was real in America less than 100 years ago. The Newspapers remind us that it is real today.

This story reminds us that African-Americans are discriminated against long after the civil war and the TV news reminds us that they still are today.

I grew up thinking both these phenomena are history. Being born in 1964 I should have grown up in a world without racism, without anti-Semitism, without discrimination. The Holocaust is history, the civil rights movement is well underway. We are an enlightened country. And as a child, my insular world is pretty much without these atrocities, or so I think.

I recently read Ta-nehisi Coates' book, *Between the World and Me*. He writes it as a letter to his 15 year son, describing the realities of the world, his personal history and his hope for a better world. He too grew up in the suburbs of Baltimore County, about 10 minutes from me. He is 10 years younger than I am, but we drove on the same streets-Liberty Road, went to the same mall –Security Square and ate at the same restaurants- Maria's pizza.

He grew up in a different world.

One in which he was afraid of the police, afraid to go out after dark, afraid of gangs, afraid of guns being pulled.

One in which the color of his skin defined him and at some points trapped him.

So I read his book with some horror and disbelief. Horror at what his day to day reality was –in the 80's and 90's, and even today and disbelief that I was so blissfully unaware. Growing up on Long Island can lead to the same reality. Long Island has been listed as one of the most segregated suburbs in the country. <sup>ii</sup>

I work hard to not be unaware today, as I know many of you do.

**We know that we can't be citizens of the US or of the world and be unaware. Because being unaware leads to us being uncaring and to people getting hurt, for no fault of their own.**

What can we do?

We need to change our definition of an American. Not the technical, legal definition of who is a citizen, but the one in our hearts, the little voice inside our head that puts others down.

**We need to ask “who are, the people?”**

As in the iconic opening phrase of the US Constitution states, “We **the people** of the United States of America” Who are these people?

In 1863 in the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln expounded on this notion “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”...

Who are these people?

Ta-Nehisi Coates reflects: “The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant, “government of the people” but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term 'people' to actually mean.” Coates continues, “In 1863 it did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me.”

He is saying this as a Black man to his black son. But unfortunately, we can say this as Jewish men and women to our children.

How we define people is important. **If people doesn't include everyone** then we have created racism, or anti-Semitism. We have created a hierarchy. A system where a group in power needs to create lesser groups, to maintain some kind of status quo.

Racism is a social construct. The result of people declaring another group as "less than." Racism is something that is taught, not inborn.

On our trip to Cuba last fall, I was really struck by the fact that Anti-Semitism is a social construct. It doesn't have to exist!

Our tour guides, and the leaders at the synagogues we visited made of point of telling us that there is no Anti-Semitism in Cuba. The Jews are called Palocos, not in a derogatory way but just due to the fact that in the 1920's there was a huge wave of Jewish Immigration from Poland, hence, Palocos. Future groups of Jews are referred to this way but it was just a description, not an insult. Even after 1959 the country became Communist, but unlike in Russia, religion was not outlawed, you just couldn't rise in many professions or in the government, if you were Religious - Jewish, Catholic, it didn't matter.

I found it fascinating to learn that there could be a part of the world, especially one with Jews, in which Anti- Semitism doesn't exist. What an awesome reality. It gives me great hope.

Prejudice is learned, not a given. Which means it can be unlearned.

As Jews we know this.

We know that we are people, with a set of beliefs and practices, with a culture and with ideals.

Not a group to be prejudice against. But do we apply that same thinking to others?

As Jews we have had to fight to be considered full citizens many times in our history.

Are we using our status to fight for the rights of others?

We feel at home in America, but that is not enough. We need to work to care for the home and build a country we want to live in.

My friend Rabbi Ed Feinstein put it this way:

We can't think of [our country] as a hotel, because this leads to thinking that it is someone else's problem. In a hotel, strangers live in proximity to one another, but share nothing. They exchange pleasantries in the elevator, but they don't really talk with one another. Each pays his bill and goes about his business without responsibility or care for the place or its patrons. We offer to contribute nothing more, because the place doesn't belong to us. It's not our place to clean up the mess in the lobby, it doesn't belong to us. It's not our place. ...We're not responsible.<sup>iii</sup>

It is great that we feel fully at home in America, fully assimilated. But it is only great| if we use our status to make this acceptance a reality for everyone. If we fight to eliminate – racism, anti-Semitism, anti- Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments.

If we fight, to create a world in which Jewish cemeteries in small towns, like Warwick, NY, where Cantor Appelbaum grew up, are not vandalized with swastikas, the day before Yom Kippur. Or any day for that matter. –You'll let us know what we can do to help.

We shouldn't have to live in a world with slogans such as Black Lives Matter or Anti-Muslim is Anti-American. These concepts should be givens.

We need to use our position to teach equality. We need to turn to our Jewish values to remind us that if anyone is oppressed, we are all oppressed. We need to fight to redefine the word "people" to fully include everyone.

**Bill Shemin knew this, Henry Johnson knew this and you know it too.**

We can look at their stories and say, Well, they were in a circumstance that enabled them to be heroes. My life is just ordinary.

I believe that everyone here can be a hero. I have one way that I want you to be a hero. It is by doing something very simple, it won't feel out of the ordinary, but if you don't do it, we will all suffer. You don't have to go to war in the same way that Bill and Henry did. But you need to believe America is worth fighting for, just like they did.

**Vote. I want you to vote.** To Vote your beliefs. To see voting as a moral obligation!

I won't tell you who to vote for because I believe too much in the separation of church and state. I respect this principle too much to stand up on this pulpit and tell you for whom you should cast your ballot. But I am going to tell you- **you have to vote.**

And I urge you to make a decision and vote for a candidate for the presidency. I have heard several people say they are not going to vote for any of the candidates, rather than vote for a candidate who they can not fully support. That is an option, but I don't think it is a very courageous one. The candidates are the choices we've been given, or given ourselves. Commit. And pick a candidate.

Jews have been disenfranchised for too much of our history for us not to relish and appreciate our right to vote. We have the obligation to honor the heroism of those who fought for our right to go to the ballot box.

Less than 100 years ago 1/2 the people in this room couldn't vote. 1920 was when the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment is passed, the one that that gives women the right to vote.

Since most of us are 2nd, 3rd or 4th generation immigrants- we too could not vote in the Country of our great great grandparents just a little over a century ago. They knew what a privilege this is.

We live in such an amazing time that we can take our right to vote for granted. But what a privilege we have!

We have the privilege of living in America- an America in which

The President of the United States offers a Rosh HaShanah video greeting to the country and holds a conference call with the American Rabbis for the last 8 years, to offer us a state of affairs briefing before the holidays.

Pretty Amazing.

### **So how should you vote?**

Vote your moral conscience

Vote your Jewish conscience

Vote for equal rights for all people

Vote for a stable economy

Vote to end racism and anti-Semitism and prejudice.

Vote for Israel

And vote for United States in which you want to live, in which you want your children and your grandchildren to live. To keep the world safe for our children, we need to keep the world safe for other people's children

Speaking of children, if your children live out of state or are in college make sure they are registered to vote. (Many of the deadlines are this week.) Voting in the state they live or go to school in could have much more of an impact on the election even more than voting here.

This might not seem very heroic.

But participating in our democracy takes courage. It means taking actions that make a difference. It is one of the many ways we design a home in which we want to live and one in which our children and grandchildren can thrive.

Bill Shemin didn't think he was a **hero**. We don't have to put ourselves in the literal line of fire but we do need to be fearless and go out there and take risks, to build a home, in to a world in which we want to live in today and tomorrow.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/world-war-i-history/videos/the-harlem-hellfighters>

<sup>ii</sup> [www.nytimes.com/.../study-calls-li-most-segregated-suburb.html](http://www.nytimes.com/.../study-calls-li-most-segregated-suburb.html)

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Ed Feinstein, SHI handout (Murray, Putman, Stiglitz)